

BOOK REVIEWS

Where the Right Went Wrong: How Neoconservatives Subverted the Reagan Revolution and Hijacked the Bush Presidency

Patrick J. Buchanan

New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2004, 272 pp.

The Right Nation: Conservative Power in America

John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge

New York: Penguin Books, 2004, 400 pp.

What's the Matter with Kansas? How Conservatives Won the Heart of America

Thomas Frank

New York: Metropolitan Books, 2004, 320 pp.

There is certainly disagreement among liberals, conservatives, and libertarians over how the American Right rose to prominence during the past generation. There is also obvious and highly spirited disagreement regarding the consequences for American public policy. However, nearly everyone agrees that the conservative movement has made most, if not all, of the intellectual and political gains since the Watergate era. Each of these books attempts to articulate the nature of this conservative revival in modern American political life. Although their respective emphases overlap rather than parallel one another, all of the authors expend much energy tracing the rise of the Right since the unsuccessful presidential candidacy of Mr. Conservative, Barry Goldwater, in 1964.

John Micklethwait and Adrian Wooldridge's highly readable and comprehensive survey of the history of the conservative movement reflects both the authors' journalistic skills and the foreigner's occasional knack for appreciating the forest that may appear to the native born as a mere collection of individual trees. Micklethwait and Wooldridge provide the most detailed account of the pivotal role played by the think tank industry (and the think tanks' financial patrons), both conservative and libertarian, that sprouted and thrived in the past three decades. Patrick J. Buchanan

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and Thomas Frank also recognize the invaluable intellectual infrastructure provided by the Cato Institute, Heritage Foundation, American Enterprise Institute, and others, although Buchanan's account is both more informed and largely more sympathetic than Frank's more cursory and partial acknowledgement that, in politics, ideas do matter and that, in contemporary American political life, the ideas of the Right, broadly and loosely defined, have mattered the most.

Complementing the praise for the Right's intellectual energy is criticism of the American Left's inability (according to Micklethwait, Wooldridge, and Buchanan) or unwillingness (according to Frank) to counter the Right's policy prescriptions with interesting, realistic, forward-thinking proposals of its own. Praise for its politics notwithstanding, the Right does not get off lightly, either from Buchanan's nationalist conservative analysis or that of the classically liberal *Economist* magazine's senior American correspondents. Confident that he knows exactly where the Right went wrong in recent years, Buchanan points his polemical finger squarely at two suspects. He charges the classical liberals and libertarians who champion free trade with economic treason for providing the intellectual cover for outsourcing America's manufacturing base overseas. To the lay reader, his misinformed account may prove persuasive, delivered in a style that is the equivalent of watching Lou Dobbs' protectionist commentaries on CNN while occasional, and highly selective, citations scroll along the bottom of the screen.

Buchanan reserves the rest of his patriotic ire for his other long-time nemesis, the neoconservative. Micklethwait and Wooldridge also suggest (whereas Buchanan asserts) that the influence and agenda of the neoconservative foreign policy team advising President George W. Bush exploited the tragedy of September 11th to direct U.S. foreign policy toward their long-standing goal of removing Saddam Hussein from power. Both books also pour a considerable amount of cold water on the neoconservative vision of liberal democracy taking root in historically inhospitable Middle Eastern soil.

However, Micklethwait and Wooldridge disagree vigorously with Buchanan's economic nationalism. In policy terms, they trace the Right's political success to its championing of economic change, technological innovation, deregulation, and globalization. This may be unsurprising, given that the *Economist*, itself, was founded in the 19th century to argue the case within the British Empire for free trade. However, Micklethwait and Wooldridge's position has the added advantage of being more empirically valid, if less emotive, than Buchanan's.

The three right-leaning authors do see eye-to-eye, as do most economic conservatives and libertarians, regarding President Bush's awful fiscal legacy. While Bush's tax-cutting is praised, he is rightly and meticulously castigated for his profligacy, amply demonstrated by an apparently congenital unwillingness to cut spending and his unwillingness to veto even the most egregious examples of congressional nest-feathering. Both books contend that this may not simply reflect finely tuned political

radar on the part of Bush, or his electoral Svengali, Karl Rove. Rather, it may more accurately reflect Bush's own accommodation with, even fondness for, the welfare state. The record clearly speaks for itself. Bush has largely governed as a Big Government conservative, seeking to improve governmental *performance* rather than to shrink either the size or the reach of the federal government.

Arguments over President Bush's conservative credentials may have figuratively passed over Thomas Frank's head as he stooped to retrieve his old copies of the *Nation* and *American Prospect*. Frank's analysis of the Right's political success places far more emphasis upon astute political marketing than upon attractive policymaking. What permeates Frank's eminently readable journey through the political culture and partisan evolution of his home state of Kansas is his longing for its old-time political religion, that is, an early 20th century, populist, blue-collar "us against them," "people not profits" cacophony of the workingman's frustrations with and complaints about the inequities and cruelties of untrammelled capitalism.

Frank's crude, if occasionally entertaining, portrayal of Republican politicians, conservative commentators, and libertarian thinkers fits neatly within the disappointing fabric of contemporary left-wing political criticism and commentary. It is the generic caricature: rich white men successfully seek even greater wealth and power through the promulgation of free market ideology that serves only to exploit the less fortunate and further divide America into Two Americas, not in partisan terms, but in Democratic Senator John Edwards' terms: into economic haves and have-nots. Frank's analysis takes up an important question for the Left: if the economic consequences of the Right's public policy are truly so disastrous for "working people," why do so many blue-collar Americans vote Republican?

Frank believes that he has unearthed the answer that's eluded so many smart Democratic political operatives for so long. The reason that the Reagan Democrats and the Bush Democrats supposedly voted against their own economic interest is that Republican political strategists—from Kevin Phillips and Roger Ailes in the late 1960s, to Lee Atwater in the late 1980s, to Karl Rove today—persuaded them that values (that is, social and cultural issues) are more important than economic issues. The patriotic, church-going folks of Middle America have been hoodwinked into trading economic security for promised, but never realized, cultural salvation.

As an Old Democrat, in ideology if not in age, Frank does not hesitate to blame the New Democrats for contributing to this political perversity. In his view, the New Democrats' unwillingness to defend labor against corporate America, to champion higher taxes and more government services, and to thumb its nose at globalization ensured a partisan fight on social and cultural grounds that heavily favored the more conservative (and unscrupulous) Republicans. The fact that Democratic presidential candidates only win after campaigning as New Democrats or Eisenhower

Republicans (Bill Clinton and Jimmy Carter) and lose after campaigning as New Deal liberals (Walter Mondale) or economic populists (Al Gore) is conveniently absent from Frank's analysis.

Between them, these books cover a great deal of the political waterfront and provide a timely and accessible introduction to the history of the modern American Right, including many of the individuals and groups whose scholarly and grassroots efforts provided, and continue to provide, the intellectual energy and organizational muscle necessary for politicians of the Right to succeed electorally. What is insufficiently addressed, however, is a highly significant question that arguably merits its own book-length examination. If, as both its supporters and enemies maintain, the Right is so powerful, in both ideological and political terms, why does the federal government—25 years after Ronald Reagan's election and a decade after Newt Gingrich's Republican Revolution—remain so operationally liberal? These four authors choose not to provide us with an answer. In truth, one of the authors would disagree with the basic premise of the question. Nevertheless, collectively they have provided us with a foundation upon which an answer may be built.

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